Teaching Excellence

TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY

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What did I do right in one freshman seminar? What did I do wrong in another? What will I do next time?

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A freshman seminar is a way of capturing students, trapping them in a department and a discipline and even in the love of learning, and holding them for tuition ransom.

A freshman seminar is characterized minimally by being restricted only to freshmen, those strange beings full of promise and terrors, not yet jaundiced by knowing how to play the system. I have taught two freshman seminars. The first, in the fall of 1987, was a triumph. In 1990 the course was a disaster.

The seminar carried the same title each time: The Psychological Interpretation of History. I am a psychohistorian with long experience; I have often given a similar course. The assigned reading and the paper topics change each time I give the course. In the two versions specifically for freshmen I centered the course around the nature of late adolescence and young adulthood, and the challenges of going to college. I encourage students to discuss their reactions to the reading, the difficulties of the next paper, ongoing events on campus and in national life.

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1987 was great; 1990 was awful. It is tempting to place responsibility for the triumph — and certainly blame for the disaster — on the mix of students. From the 1987 group came a Watson Fellowship winner, a Stanford Law School entrant at 19, a senior commencement speaker, and several who have gone on to do extremely well in master's programs. Of the eleven who started in the fall of 1990, in stark contrast, only four were still on campus at the end of the sophomore year. In the seminar as it wore on, one who was exceedingly bright decided at midterm to remain silent, another dropped out because he could not bear to discuss feelings, two commented incessantly during class — to each other.

My recollection is that in 1987 freshmen were soon talking excitedly whether I was there or not, and they would often go on despite my loudest attempts to gain attention or impose order. Some students, however, have recalled that it took time for them to really get into discussing and to jell as a group. Repeatedly I wanted to tape a class, but I never could, because I could not feel certain that someone on any particular day would not bring up a memory or a feeling or discovery that he or she would not want immortalized on film. The result is that I have only my fond feeling for this class, and no record of when someone said, "Well, I'm adopted and..." which led into a consideration of whether all children must go through an oedipal experience.

It's been a pleasure to follow the 1987 students. We had a reunion during their sophomore year; they came to my home and at one point during supper began, at a student's suggestion, an accounting of where people, including my wife and me, presently stood with regard to religion. I am in good touch with three of the four 1990 survivors who remained on campus.

But are we who teach allowed to pin anything on the mix of students that the registrar hands us? Yes, we are, but we are also charged with reaching out and reaching into that mix and somehow getting — what? Well, at least a fraction of the shifting and flickering and conflicted attention that students can give to course work, to thinking and reflecting and getting themselves motivated.

Partly I recall 1987 as a triumph because I am convinced that I was able to set them going, that I could call them to share in the kind of work that I have found so exciting and rewarding intellectually and emotionally. I need to feel that I can make a difference, and I need to see from faces lighting up that I am making a differ-

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ence. It's like being a live actor on the "legitimate" stage: you play much better when you sense that the audience is with you.

In 1990 I could never get that feeling. My fervent hope for a rerun of 1987 crumbled. I came to dread each class; I lived only for the last day of the semester. I got no kicks from most of the students, and it became harder and harder for me to do more than sink into despair.

Could I have broken the 1990 deadlock? I am a Great Teacher, I have my college's teaching award on my office wall, and the all-university teaching award on my desk. I have been able to reach most students in most courses I have taught, but 1990 stumped me.

Now, in retrospect that is still painful and embarrassing, I regret that I did not analyze my role more fully. I did not acknowledge how much I need signs that students are coming to like me and growing interested in the fields and methods of inquiry that I'm pushing. Sometimes I act out in my head a little dramatic scene in which I have a showdown with the seminar and tell them how disappointed I am with them — and in some versions of this playlet I add, with myself — and I go on to wonder what we all could do to fix things.

Perhaps I should have tried a mid-term evaluation, a device I've never resorted to because I always feel that I can break through to almost everyone if I have more time, and I guess I never really wanted to hear at mid-term that I'm failing.

Probably it would have been more effective to ask students to see me individually and give them my picture of the thrice-weekly wasteland, whereupon we could consider whether it would remain permanently parched. Now I think that I should have taken a very strong line with some students — how can you be so smart and still be so stubborn about confronting key issues in the human past and your present? Why do you contribute but get huffy if we point out that you're entering the discussion from left field and throwing our work a bad curve?

I couldn't bring myself to attempt any kind of extensive salvage operation. I was too accustomed to seeing at least some visible reaction from an increasing number of students, too accustomed to papers being turned in that demonstrate growing seriousness and analytic power and emotional grasp. The four who were with me and remained at the university out of the 1990 wreckage were not enough to sustain me.

What will I do when 1990 threatens again? First I will moan about the capriciousness of the registrar's scheduling vagaries and the failures of the director of admissions. Then I will rail at the fate that placed me in a confrontation with unyielding error and intractable refusal to recognize my quasi-magical gifts. Later, but not too late, I hope, I will reflect about what I need from students and what I don't appear to be receiving, and I will try to find ways to alter what I'm doing — and what they're doing.

I hope I will succeed, because I will continue to see the rewards as very great, exactly as I have judged them in the past: for students, entry into the life of the mind, an experience made possible for me by teachers alive and undying within me; for me, the sense that I am effective, that I have touched the lives of the great and warm and wonderful young people who — usually — fill my classes.

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